

18 March 2023

Strength in the Lord (Ephesians 6. 10-23)

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As you might imagine, the last few weeks have been rather busy for me and Neil, for Susanna and Melissa and others in our Benedictus community. For me, amidst the usual round of services, meditation and pastoral connections, I've been preparing some of the talks and retreats I'll be giving when we're on sabbatical. Susanna has been working on the services and happenings to be offered in the coming months, and we've together been sorting out the logistics of it all. The strength and depth of our community has become very apparent in this process, and this gives us great cause for celebration.

Thanks to our many meditation leaders, meditation will continue at lunch times in the church and every evening online – as well as on weekday mornings. For our Saturday and Easter services, we have teams of people working with Susanna on liturgies, organising and leading music, operating the sound system and managing the logistics of Zoom; we have others arranging and hosting supper, and counting and banking the offertory. Members of our community will continue to lead our different groups and offerings, preach in a Call and Response series starting a couple of weeks after Easter, participate as spiritual directors in the Retreat in Daily Life, and care for other's needs. Our Benedictus Council will be looking after the necessary business of our community, as well as continuing to discern what's unfolding among us, while the quiet faithfulness in prayer of many others undergirds it all. It's amazing and humbling to see how profoundly shared this ministry of Benedictus is, how many of you are so generously involved in sustaining our life together.

In the light of all this, when earlier this week, I looked up the readings set for today – the passage we just heard from the end of the letter to the Ephesians seemed particularly apt. It's a passage addressed to a whole community, exhorting it to a shared awareness of its vocation and a shared sense of spiritual purpose. The

only problem is, that when I came back to it towards the end of the week to prepare this reflection, I discovered I'd misread the chapter number. The reading actually set was from Ephesians 5. But in the end, I decided to stick with my misreading, since it seems to offer a resource that speaks to this moment in our common life (and besides, it was too late to change tack!!).

Paul's so-called letter to the Ephesians, the scholars say, is likely neither addressed to a community in Ephesus nor written by the apostle Paul. In our translation, the letter opens with the words: 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 1. 1). But in the earliest manuscripts, the phrase 'in Ephesus' is missing – raising the possibility that this was a circular letter addressed to more than one community. As for its authorship, analysis of the letter's style and content suggests that, rather than Paul himself, the likely author was 'a follower of Paul' who was picking up key themes in his thought and teaching.¹ But whoever precisely wrote it and whoever first received it doesn't really matter. For, as scholar Paul Achtemeier writes, 'Twenty centuries of Christians have found Ephesians useful for the life of the church, and its content retains its validity regardless of who set it down'.²

And two aspects of this content seem worth drawing out. One is the letter's concern with the 'struggle ... against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6.12). To our ears, this language may seem a bit over the top, uncomfortably close to notions of 'spiritual warfare' enthusiastically deployed by certain (often sectarian) Christian groups. The essential point, though, is to proclaim the power of Christ in the face of all that threatens the goodness of God's creation and God's purpose for it. The basic idea is that destructive powers seemingly at work in the world are ultimately no match for the love and grace of God made effective in us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier et al., *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp.379-380.

² Achtemeier et al., *Introducing the New Testament*, p.380.

Those to whom the letter was first addressed in the Greco-Roman world seem to have conceived of these powers in terms of malevolent spirits active to deceive and destroy. And perhaps that's as good a way as any of imagining what seems to be a perennial tendency for seeds of discord and division to provoke enmity between human groups, and for human responsiveness to be distorted and co-opted by oppression and dissolution. Ephesians insists, however, that as we come to know and entrust ourselves to Christ, what starts to work in us is his Spirit, and what starts to become possible is a new kind of human being. Our identities are no longer defined by who we are against, just as in Christ no-one is excluded or rejected. What then begins to emerge is the possibility of one new humanity sourced in and enlivened by the very life of God. This is summed up in chapter 2 of the letter: 'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph. 2.17).

Of course, the problem is that backsliding into old habits of division and alienation remains an ever-present possibility. So the second concern of Ephesians is a series of exhortations about how 'to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called' (Eph. 4.1). How to maintain connection with the source of our truer being so as to enable real, universal community and the fulfilment of God's purposes. In the concluding chapter of the letter, in the passage we heard, these various exhortations are summed up. In keeping with the metaphor of 'spiritual warfare', there's ample use of militaristic imagery to characterise the necessary posture and action of faith. 'Take up the whole armour of God', readers are exhorted, 'so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day' (Eph. 6.13).

Now perhaps you find, as I do, that this imagery goes initially against the grain – especially given Ephesians' emphasis on Christ as the foundation of the world's peace. Look more closely, however, and maybe that's the point. In fact, maybe what's happening in this text is a powerful subversion of the whole notion of violent conflict as a means to peace, the whole idea that we may attain to fullness of life by force. Look again at the nature of the godly armour we're to put on: it consists of

‘the belt of truth’ and ‘the breastplate of righteousness’ or justice, and for shoes, we’re told to wear ‘whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace’. And that’s an interesting instruction. I wonder what such shoes might be for each of us, what might make *us* ready to proclaim the gospel peace? Could they consist of forgiveness or patience? Compassion, humility, forbearance?

Along with these items of spiritual clothing, warriors in the cause of the good, we who seek to participate in the building up of a new humanity and a new creation, are to ‘take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one’. All those undermining thoughts, those insults and misunderstandings and unwarranted attacks that burn us and make us enemies of one another. Take the helmet of salvation – which is to say your awareness of being accepted, of being liked and belonging indefeasibly to God. And for a sword – to cut through or turn aside the destructive power of injustice and untruth – take ‘the Spirit, which is the word of God’. Isn’t this an amazing passage – an amazing vision of how non-violent being and action can counter the violence of our world?

Well, as for the Ephesians, this is our calling as a community. This is our work as persons of faith. And to sustain it, we’re directed to ‘pray in the Spirit’, ‘to keep alert and always persevere in our prayers for all the saints’, for all our fellow warriors. Or in imagery that Jesus himself seemed to prefer – for all those labouring with us in the vineyard of the Lord, tending the growth and flourishing of the whole human family – the whole creation, enjoying the fruits of faithfulness. In the coming months, some of us are spending a little time far off, some of us are remaining near. Let us pray for each other, that we may know the peace and love of God. Let us give thanks for the blossoming of our life together, and commit anew to offering the gifts we are receiving for the life of the world.